The St. Dunstan Mystery

By PERRY NEWBERRY.

When Holme had finally departed, following Marcus by some minutes, it was half past six and too late to attempt a nap, so I peeled down to the buff and went for a swim in my tub. I was splashing cold water over my shivering form when I remembered the alarm; it hadn't gone off.

At six o'clock the three of us had been sitting there, and if that nerve-destroyer had broken loose we'd have hit the ceiling! It hadn't gone off!

I jumped from the tub and ran as I was, dripping little streams. I gripped the clock in shivering fingers and held it to the light. It registered six-thirty-seven, but the alarm hand pointed now at ten-fifteen. Some one had surely attempted to prevent my early waking. Had I slept at all, I should undoubtedly have missed my appointment with Isabelle Reade.

CHAPTER VIII.
On Board the Wilton.

A little note was all that was left at the St. Francis of Isabelle Reade:

Dear Friend John Gilmore:

I am running away so you cannot shake the truth out of me. I would rather stay and be shaken. You will never see me again, but I shall remember you always—always! Your friend, Isabelle.

She had gone, bag and baggage, before seven, the clerk told me. I had frightened her away by prying into her secret, crude brute that I was! Well, wasn't that just what I wanted? Hadn't I determined to take her to the station and start her on the train out of my life? What had she to do with my forty-year-old life, anyhow?

She would remember me always, doubled; that second "always" gave my heart a thrill that was outside its experience of forty years' steady work. "I would rather stay and be shaken." God bless her! I wouldn't shake her; never—either way!

If she had stayed, I would forget the Wilton, forget Ecuador and adventuring, forget everything but herself, and I would make myself a reality in her life, not a remembrance, if that were possible. Too late for anything but regrets; she was gone.

I sailed south on the Wilton Saturday morning. My suggestion—Marcus politely said invitation—had been acted upon, and the detective sergeant was at the dock to watch me place enough water between steamer and shore-line to frustrate swimming. The chief had agreed with Edwards and me that a seafaring life was better for a fractious suspect than forcible detainer, and Marcus, somewhat grudgingly, had concurred.

Captain Blake, after he had pried his ship away from its dock, gave me cordial greeting and the stateroom of a superfluous third officer with the freedom of the bridge. The Wilton was a small boat; I was surprised that my memory of it had been so defective. It had seemed ample in proportions when I was not personally involved; now I had grave doubts of its seagoing ability, and I felt I was taking extreme hazards in trusting myself aboard.

There were about forty passengers, the chief steward told me, half of whom would leave us at California ports. It was not the time of year for heavy South American travel. These voyagers were getting arranged in their staterooms, unpacking their steamer chairs and fighting for places at the captain's table.

I watched Fort Point disappear in the haze, then went to my cabin. We were crossing that disagreeable bit of water outside the Golden Gate called, for obvious reasons, the "Potato Patch." I wasn't ill, but there was no certainty of seamanly qualities in me, and I preferred to begin the test under less rigorous conditions. I would forego luncheon and keep to my berth for a while.

Late in the afternoon I went on deck again, to find smooth seas and a warm sun had brought out the major part of our passengers, and I made a tour of investigation to see what fate had cast me up against. I had just begun getting interested when I saw Isabelle Reade. She was sitting in a steamer-chair in the lee of the after-cabin, looking across the water at the distant shore-line, just as though she was at Brenta's watching the door.

I went to her directly. 'iss Reade," I cried, and her eyes came to meet mine with a look of startled surprise, "Isn't this the most wonderful happening!"

"Is it happening?" she asked, rising quickly, her eyes interrogating mine, not seeing my outstretched hand.

I took her hand regardless. "It is coincidence—actually," I affirmed. "I never guessed—then I saw you! I have fought—fought everybody, even you—to make this trip on this boat—thinking it was taking me away from ever seeing you again—and it brought me to you. Coincidence? It is more than that. If I were a Mohammedan I should now say, 'Kismet!'"

There was still doubt in her face, and the hand I held was trembling.

"Have I ever lied to you?" I asked quickly. "Have I ever in all my long life told you a single fib?" I had met her twice before, but she shook her head in grave negative. "Then believe me now that I never even guessed you possibly might go the same way I was going. I could hardly believe it when I saw you; but it is you and this is I; and we are on the same boat, and I am happy; That is every word truth—I swear it!"

"You won't shake me?" she asked, her lips curving at their corners adorably.

"No!" I almost shouted.

"Nor question me?"

"Not a single question! I won't even remember that you have a secret. That is all past—back there on shore in the gray fogs of the city. Out here on the sunlit sea there is no mystery, no—no nothing! Just you, going home; just me with you. Just us!"

"Then you may sit down beside me," she said, sinking into her chair, "and you may tell me how you come to be on a steamer bound south."

There was some one's vacant chair near by, and I did not wait for permission, setting it as close beside her own as I might; and I told her how I had begun hunting adventures at forty. I made no mention of the events of the night after I had last seen her, or of the gruesome find which I was sure had once been her murdered friend's sweetheart. I had promised to forget it all, and I was not anxious to bring added trouble to her mind, for she was evidently still grieving for the tragedy which she knew. I tried my best to take her mind far away from its sadness, telling her of my plans and prospects, and in a way I succeeded. She had smiled several times before the Chinaman with his gong announced dinner.

We had been placed at different tables I discovered, but it was an easily rectified mistake. I introduced Captain Blake, who promptly ejected the occupant of the chair at his left for Miss Reade. I was across the table within speaking distance, but it was not an entirely satisfactory arrangement to me.

For the first time I looked at Captain Blake and found that he had points; he wasn't so old as I, to begin with, an error of judgment in selection, older men making better officers, I felt sure. Then he had curly brown hair, expressive brown eyes and a smiling mouth—was quite handsome, in fact—and he could talk in an interesting manner that should have enveloped the whole table in its attraction.

As the representative of the Thurston Line, the official host as it were, I felt that he should be generously distributive of his charms—not use them all up on Miss Reade. As a steamer efficiency expert, I saw opportunity right here for the improvement of the service.

Miss Reade didn't seem to mind. She was no efficiency expert, and I found that I was not the only one with power to raise the bloom of sorrow from her. She smiled at the captain's sallies and applauded his stories, and I was shortly eating away, glum and jaundiced, which brought me disagreeably to her attention and, of course, into the conversation. She was not callously trying to make me sulk; she was just young and naturally happy, and she wanted every one around her happy.

She was trying as hard as she knew how to forget her sorrows, and she was letting anyone who would help her. I could understand that I had no reason to feel hurt or annoyed at her, but in my mind was the comparison of our ages and the gray wisps in my hair, and I could not be quite reasonable. Youth for youth does not appeal to uncynical forty.

But fortunately the captain had duties other than attending to youthful beauty, and after dinner Miss Reade and I found ourselves again alone in steamer-chairs.

"Now," she said decisively, "I intend to tell you some things, and you will have to remember all the while what you have promised me. Every single question you ask will mean one confidence cut off. Because it is dark and you may not see my face, I am going to take risks and talk, but remember, I am going to talk very, very carefully, and very, very slowly. All during dinner I was thinking just how much of me I might tell you without betraying another."

"All during dinner!" I gasped.

"Was that a question?" she asked sternly.

"No, no! An exclamation of stupendous, awed surprise. All during dinner!"

"Why repeat it? You think I can't think when that captain-man is telling his stories? I can and did. Now listen and do not interrupt. I am going on this steamer as far as Mazatlan, five more days at least. There my mother meets me, and we go home, which is near Durango. When she knows how kind you have been to me she will ask you to visit us."

"Yes?" I cried eagerly.

"Because you are on business trip you will decline—"

"I will not!"

"Because you are on a business trip," she repeated firmly, "you will decline. Otherwise I cannot tell her that you have been kind to me, and then we shall not see each other the two days the Wilton stays at Mazatlan."

"But why may not I—no, no! It isn't a question!"

"Because you would learn all the things I am not telling you now," she answered. "If you wished, you might tell my mother that some day by and by you would accept her invitation."

"I shall do that. May I ask when is some day by and by?"

"When this is all forgotten—all gone in the past. A year, perhaps two."

"Why talk of eternity?" I said sadly.

"Two years is nothing, nothing!"

"But I am forty, and add two and the answer is hopelessness. You plus two are—"

"Twenty-one. There! I was going to tell you that, so you would know that I am not so youthful as you have thought. I am past nineteen, and there is no excuse for your assumption of age superiority. I have noticed a growing tendency in you to differentiate between us on the false conception of a serious disparity in our years."

"I never used any such words in conversation in my life!" I gasped.

"You probably couldn't," she returned. "I was taught more difficult words than that in a convent at Klosterneburg, where I was educated."

"That is not in Mexico?"

"In Europe, where I lived until a year ago. Now, I think I have told you all the uneventful things of my eventless life that I may. I wish it was more interesting."

"It is every bit interesting," I protested. "May I summarize? You might have forgotten something, and I may not question. First, you are nineteen—"

"Nineteen plus."

"Nineteeen plus, English and Spanish, living near Durango with your mother—"

"Father died a year ago," she said simply.

"Wonderfully educated in long words at Klosterneburg Convent, and—unmarried?"

"Of course. I didn't tell you unnecessary things."

"And you can giggle—you told me that!"

"Quite unnecessarily. You heard me giggle, but should be gentlemanly and forget it."

"I am not forgetting anything," I said emphatically, just as Captain Blake found us and volunteered to show us Cypress light from the bridge, a spectacle which I would willingly enough have neglected. However, if it was up to me to play chaperon, I intended to be a vigilant one, and followed the two and listened to an explanation of time flashes and revolving reflectors which was much less interesting than the meager tale of an eventless life.

We put in at Port San Pedro next afternoon and found some excitement in wondering whether two policemen seen on the dock were there for me. I had not thought of Marcus since I left him at the San Francisco jetty, but I knew he was not feeling any too secure about me and might change his mind any minute. Miss Reade, at my side, was chatting away of the panorama before us, and I suddenly realized that I could not be arrested there. It would never do to be taken by policemen from her side, in front of all the passengers, casting a stigma upon her for the balance of the voyage. I should have thought of that possibility.

"I am going ashore," I said suddenly, as the gangway was being made ready to lower.

"So am I, please," she cried. "Take me with you."

"No, really; I can't," I stammered. "I—I—I want a drink." It was the only thing I could think of on short notice that she might not share with me. She laughed.

"So do I. Take me."

"A drink in a saloon," I insisted.

"I've been in a saloon with you. Take me."

"Isabelle," I commanded. "Go up on that bridge and talk to the captain. I have to go ashore."

She looked at me in wonder. "You send me to him?" she asked, then turned and hastened away. The police were at the foot of the gangway, which was now in place, and I hastened down it among the first of a dozen baggage-burdened passengers. If I had thought twice I should have known that uniformed men would not be sent to arrest me. I had made Isabelle Reade's eyes snap and voice deepen in resentment for nothing.

When I returned aboard she was not on deck and I went to my cabin to think out this new danger to her. It was an absolute impossibility for me to be arrested publicly on the Wilton. When I alone was concerned, it had been but a rather exasperating joke and had worried me not at all.

Even if arrested, I had no doubt that detention would mean nominal jail, confinement in a room under guard, perhaps, and the matter of a few days. But now that Isabelle would be regarded as my friend, I her one acquaintance on the ship, I must guard her from the suspicion of connection in any way with the St. Dunstan murder.

That meant, bluntly, leaving her distinctly alone. It was too early on the journey for our friendship to have attracted attention from the passengers, but its continuation would be noticed without doubt. She was a very young girl, very beautiful and attractive, traveling alone. Should she prove to be the friend of a man arrested for murder—well, she must not, that was all!

Could I explain this to her so she would understand? My cabin was not large enough to contain that question with me, so I took it to the bows where there was room. I knew Isabelle Reade pretty well now. If I told her anything, I could not drive her away from our friendship with an ax—marline-spike was the better word on shipboard! She would be so loyal she would insist on jail with me. She was just that age for a romantic sacrifice; no, that was doing her fineness of character an injustice. At any age, she'd be like that. She was the kind to stick by a friend in distress till the last dog was hung—bah! a bad similie, till the last dregs were drunk.

If I wanted her to begin loving me, to tell her was the quick way of going at it. I did; flatly, frankly, right from the shoulder. I admitted to myself that I wanted Isabelle Reade's love. Then, said I to myself in the bows of the Wilton, looking across the San Pedro Bay at the hills beyond, I have only to tell her what is facing me and order her to keep away from me the balance of the voyage. Result, if I am arrested at San Diego, Mazatlan or by Captain Blake aboard, she'll be tarred with the murder-pitch for the balance of her life, even if she does not implicate herself in the attempt to save me.

That result was too costly a winning of her love. I put it aside and reversed the reasoning. Tell her nothing; I had hurt her feelings, unintentionally, but no whit less surely, already, and there was an explanation and apology coming from me before our pleasant relations might be resumed. She would expect that, and I guessed she was prepared to make me pay well for sending her away from me to the captain. And she could, hang it! She could make me suffer!

Tell her nothing, make no explanation, no apology, and suffer; there was the alternative? She had pride enough to keep her away from me a longer trip than the Wilton was making, and that was the situation required. All I need do was do nothing; easy enough? The hardest thing to do that I ever made up my mind had to be done!

I saw her on the bridge beside Captain Blake when we cast loose from the San Pedro dock and poked her nose up the bay on our journey. She didn't see me then, nor much at dinner; just enough so that her neglect was inconspicuous. I finished first and got away from the table by refusing coffee, and I need my coffee! I am accustomed to three cups each meal and two at late night supper.

I found the purser whose acquaintance I had made the first day out. Reedley was a round faced, chunky built, youthful chap who hummed scraps of rag-time between sentences and drummed an accompaniment on his desk-lid or the arm of his chair with his fingers. He was unconsciously assisting me in learning my new vocation of steamer efficiency, and he was a willing master. He enjoyed showing me that he knew the steamer business from A to Z and then backward, and I gained knowledge in chunks that had to be broken up and segregated, ore from slag, by my deeper general experience.

We would make San Diego, the last port in California's jurisdiction, at an early hour next morning, and there I should be arrested if Marcus had changed his mind. Farther south was either high seas or foreign ports and Captain Blake would have to be the jailor. I decided to remain up and greet San Diego, half hoping that officers would take me quietly away in the gray dawn while the ship and Isabelle Reade were sound asleep.

I stayed with Reedley and Chief Steward Hunt until they must have thought I never would let them sleep, talking steamers and shipping; then went below to the engine rooms and started a friendship with the second engineer which only began getting chummy at the end of his watch. There was nothing to do after that but pace up and down the deck or sit in my stateroom and wonder how Isabelle had spent the evening without her chaperon, neither of which made time fly on wings.

It was a perfect night of soft winds, smooth sea and bright stars, and I finally settled down in an overcoat and rug in Isabelle's chair on deck. Because I had not drunk my after-dinner coffee, my eyelids were heavy as lead and five minutes after I sat down I was slumbering.

CHAPTER IX.
The Last to Leave.

A hand on my shoulder awoke me to broad daylight, to a beaming sun and the immediate knowledge that it was late morning.

"You are not allowed to sleep all day," said Isabelle Reade, and I wondered fearfully if I had snored. Horrors! Had my mouth been hanging open?

"Where are we?" I cried, gaping like a fish. "What time is it?"

"It is nine o'clock or more and I have been sitting here since eight, so I woke you. You are not interesting company asleep."

"Are we past San Diego?" I questioned, still confused, but able to look at my watch and verify the suspicion that newspaper habits had again conquered.

"Mile and miles—I mean knots and knots. Were you intending to get another drink at San Diego, Mr. Gilmore?"

That was sarcasm. I caught it, even in my dazed condition.

"Yes—no, certainly not," I replied. Then, "Did I snore, Isabelle?" I asked meekly.

"Not enough to disturb the man at the wheel," she said maliciously.

"Children screaming, women fainting? Nothing like that?" I asked.

"No. Quite a gentlemanly exhalation and inhalation of the breath. Were you out all night in that steamer chair?"

"Mostly. Too beautiful to remain indoors. Intended to study the stars but fell asleep. Needed coffee," I explained.

(To be Continued.)

Many a man has made his debut on the broad road to ruin through the narrow side door.

Never argue with a man who talks loud. You cannot convince him in a thousand years.

When a woman gets a love-letter from her husband she appreciates it if it has a check in it.

It is no sign that a small boy is incorrigible just because he doesn't mind a little rain.

Never give up—unless it's a lonely spot and the other fellow has a sandbag or a revolver.

"THE CUPBOARD WAS BARE"

Old Bolshevik Hubbard, she went to the cupboard to get the poor Russ a peace bone. But—